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# Mississippi's First Statewide Teachers' Strike

by

Emily Doyne Smith

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Letters and College of Education and Psychology  
and the Department of History and School of Library and Information Science  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

Dr. Rebecca A. Tuuri, Committee Chair

Dr. Chester M. Morgan

Dr. Teresa S. Welsh

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Dr. Rebecca A. Tuuri,  
Committee Chair

---

Dr. Kyle Zelner  
Department Chair

---

Dr. Karen S. Coats  
Dean of the Graduate School

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the Education Reform Act of 1982 (ERA) inadvertently led to Mississippi's first statewide teachers' strike in 1985 because of the Southeastern pay average clause recommending that the teachers' pay should reach the average of the southeastern states, if possible. The teachers' associations in Mississippi used this clause to lobby and promote teachers' pay to that average. However, after two years of stagnated pay raises, the teachers' associations led a state statewide teachers' strike. The strike successfully raised the teachers' salaries and moved state legislators to consider the teachers' pay issue carefully afterwards. However, the pay raise cost the teachers their leverage to strike. The pay package in 1985 contained an anti-strike clause that automatically fired striking teachers. While many historians have chronicled the passage of the ERA, little research narrates the effects of the ERA.

This strike illustrates the conflict between conservatism and progressivism in Mississippi. Legislators hesitated to raise taxes again for the teachers' raises because of the cost of the ERA and the state's poor economy. However, Governor William F. Winter, who promoted and passed the ERA, set the precedent to promote education reform through public campaigning. The teachers' associations did the same. They mobilized the teachers after the ERA's passage. After the legislators and Governor William "Bill" Allain neglected the Southeastern average goal, the associations used the organization of teachers to strike. After the strike, state politicians and the next governor, Ray Mabus, successfully negotiated another pay raise without raising taxes.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ERA	Education Reform Act of 1982
MAE	Mississippi Association of Educators
MAFT	Mississippi American Federation of Teachers
MPE	Mississippi Professional Educators

## CHAPTER I - Introduction

Since the beginning of state-funded education in 1870, Mississippi public schools struggled financially due to a dual system that separated black and white children. Although Mississippi schools fully integrated in 1970, the state continued to struggle with high illiteracy rates, low state education spending, and underpaid teachers. To address such problems, Governor William F. Winter (1980-84) proposed a host of reforms, including a statewide kindergarten program, an extensive reading aide program, an appointed state superintendent of education, a stronger compulsory attendance law, and stricter enforcement of teacher certification. Under pressure from an electorate inspired by Winter's vision of better schools staffed with quality teachers, the Legislature passed the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1982. While other historians have examined the passage of the Act in depth, this thesis documents the long process of raising teacher salaries to the average of the Southeastern states, as recommended in the ERA.<sup>1</sup>

The tentative recommendation to raise teacher pay to the Southeastern average was not, like the kindergarten or the reading aide programs, one of the main goals of the ERA. However, teachers' associations, such as the Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE) and the Mississippi American Federation of Teachers (MAFT), used this minor recommendation as the lynchpin in their arguments to increase teachers' pay. However, the Mississippi Legislature had already increased taxes by \$110 million to cover the ERA's cost. State officials then hesitated to add more taxes to raise teachers' salaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Mullins Jr, *Building Consensus: A History of the Passage of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982* (Self-published, 1992); Charles C. Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); and Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2006* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006).



The conflict between teachers' associations and the state government over teachers' pay reflected the tension between conservatism and progressivism in Mississippi. As governor, Winter broke new ground in pressuring the legislators to pass the progressive ERA. To build support for the legislation, Winter had to keep taxes low. The next governor, William "Bill" Allain, and conservative legislators resisted increasing taxes, which were necessary to raise state teachers' salaries to the Southeastern average. Statewide teachers' associations then sought community support and energized teachers to join Mississippi's first statewide teachers' strike in 1985, which pressured the Legislature to raise the teachers' salaries.

While the strike was successful in getting the Legislature to raise the teachers' salaries, its resolution came at a heavy cost. To prevent another massive strike, the Legislature's pay package contained an anti-strike clause that punished striking teachers with automatic firing.<sup>2</sup> Teachers now would have to rely on their elected officials, instead of themselves, to fight for pay increases. In 1987, successful gubernatorial candidate Ray Mabus finally fulfilled the promise of raising teacher salaries to the Southeastern average.

Winter proposed the ERA to remedy the deficiencies in the public school system. Like most moderates, Winter primarily focused on improving education performance in Mississippi to relieve the state from poverty.<sup>3</sup> Winter believed the state's poor education system directly correlated with the Mississippi's poor economy. Mississippi had one of the lowest spending rates on education in the country. Kindergartens did not have state

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<sup>2</sup> Cliff Treyens and Steve Riley, "Senate may tackle teacher-pay veto," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 19, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi*, 6-7.

funding because many whites saw them as just babysitting centers for black children.<sup>4</sup> Winter intended the ERA to provide the means to improve state education to meet the national standard. In 1982, Winter called a special session of the Legislature and gathered public support to pressure lawmakers into passing the ERA.<sup>5</sup> Negotiations over funding led to increases in taxes on retail sales, personal and corporate income, and taxes on alcohol, tobacco, and soft drinks.<sup>6</sup>

Mississippi's education reform reflected Winter's moderate political ideology, which differed from a growing national conservatism in the 1980s. Starting in the 1970s, conservative ideology of low taxes, reduced public programs, and anti-union sentiment spread nationally. Ronald Reagan's election was the culmination of that conservative movement. The Reagan administration called for reduced taxes, increased privatization, and it openly threatened to cut the Department of Education from the presidential Cabinet.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, as Congress cut federal taxes, the Mississippi Legislature increased state taxes to fund the ERA. Still, state lawmakers resisted further tax increases for teachers' pay raises to appease their conservative constituency. In this same national conservative climate, northern businesses moved to the South, where unions became weaker because of strong right-to-work laws.<sup>8</sup> After Reagan responded to the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike by firing the strikers in 1981, unions became weaker still as they reduced their militant action.<sup>9</sup> However, four years

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 214-15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 220-21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Boston, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), 237-238.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 233.

after Reagan's high-profile action, the Mississippi teachers' associations gained both members and enough influence to use hardline tactics like striking. Mississippi was not in lock step with the rest of the South or the nation. Instead, the state strained to implement education reform while also balancing fiscal conservatism and social progressivism in the state.

The purpose of this thesis is to show how the ERA influenced negotiations over teachers' pay. While historians have labeled the ERA an important piece of progressive legislation, they have mainly focused on its creation, not its implementation.<sup>10</sup> This thesis explores the consequences of the ERA's passage, revealing how it changed public opinion in favor of granting salary increases to teachers. Teachers' associations also grew in influence because of the Act, and they used that influence to promote increasing teachers' pay. After the legislators neglected the issue, teachers committed to striking in 1985. To resolve the strike, lawmakers increased teacher pay by \$4,400 over the following three years with the caveat that teachers would be fired immediately if they conducted future strikes.<sup>11</sup> While conservative Legislators scored a victory with the anti-striking clause, teachers scored an important victory as politicians began to solicit their support after the strike. Then in 1987, using the ERA as a guide, newly-elected governor Ray Mabus pushed the Legislature to pursue the Southeastern average goal.

This thesis draws primarily from Governor William "Bill" Allain's papers, oral histories, the Education Reform Act Implementation papers, the Mississippi Department of Education papers, and newspapers. The two collections from the Allain papers

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<sup>10</sup> Mullins, *Building Consensus*; Bolton, *William F. Winter*; Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*.

<sup>11</sup> Nash and Taggart. *Mississippi Politics*, 233.

(Correspondence Concerning Teacher Pay Raises and Petitions and Resolutions for Teacher Pay Raises) reveal support from teachers and the general public for raising Mississippi teachers' salaries to the Southeastern average within two years. The main arguments were to keep the promise made in the 1982 Act and to keep skilled educators from leaving Mississippi for better opportunities elsewhere. MAE encouraged teachers, students, and community supporters to sign petitions and write letters to the governor encouraging the raise. The petitions and resolutions, which came mainly from the Gulf coast and rural areas such as Booneville and Lucedale, indicate a widespread MAE determined to lobby for the goal. Oral histories offer a first-hand account of what the teachers and administrators experienced during the Teacher Strike of 1985. State and local newspapers, including the *Clarion-Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News*, have helped to construct the narrative, especially on the early planning for the strike.

The following chapters reveal how the Southeastern pay average clause provided the justification necessary to raise teachers' pay. However, conservatism also constrained the Southeastern average clause in the ERA. The teachers' strike, and its consequences, was a clear example of this contest between progressivism and conservatism. Chapter II argues that the teachers' associations, with their increased membership and influence, mobilized and organized public school teachers to push against the boundaries of conservative sentiment. Although increasing teachers' salaries would increase state taxes, the teachers' associations used the ERA's Southeastern pay average clause to justify their arguments.

To that end, Chapter III argues that the teachers' associations' collective efforts and the Legislature's inattention to the Southeastern average clause created the teachers'

strike of 1985. The teachers' associations bargained collectively for increased pay. Governor Allain refused to propose increases in teachers' pay that would also increase taxes, but without the tax increases, teachers' pay could not reach the Southeastern average. In response, teachers began to assess their options, and many concluded that the potential for increased pay outweighed the risk of losing their jobs on account of their striking. Because of the strike's effectiveness in garnering support from teachers and their communities, the Legislature agreed to a harsh compromise: increased teachers' pay but making future striking illegal.

Chapter IV argues that the strike made the Legislature more receptive to increased teachers' pay. Therefore, Governor Mabus took up the teachers' pay raise issue early in his term as governor. Like Allain during the teachers' strike, Mabus refused to increase taxes to fund more pay raises. Unlike Allain, however, Mabus--a former member of Winter's ERA team--persistently pushed the teachers' pay issue to the forefront. To avoid a tax hike, Mabus persuaded the Legislature to fund the teachers' pay raise by cutting several agencies' budgets and allocating more money in the state budget toward education. Mabus successfully increased teachers' pay to the Southeastern average with these measures. However, appeasing the conservative public and legislators by not raising taxes doomed his next education reform, as funding negotiations with legislators broke down.

The teachers' strike illustrated not only teachers fighting for a pay raise, but also a contest between conservative and progressive political ideologies in Mississippi. While fiscal conservatism dictated that government should keep taxes low, improving the lives of the state's citizens required more spending on education. Winter's ERA ignited this

contest, and his public campaigning forged a weapon that would lead to first statewide teachers' strike in Mississippi.

## CHAPTER II - Riding the Wave of Success:

### Teachers' Associations' Political Activism in 1983-1984

Mississippi teachers in the 1970s and 1980s were financially strained; many did not earn enough to support a family or pay the utilities for their home. At her first teaching job in the Delta, Marsha Hester had to stay on her father's insurance policy until he could not cover her anymore. Lynn Anderson, a teacher at the lower elementary school in Poplarville, also did not receive health insurance, and she remembered getting her first check after signing her first teachers' contract for approximately \$9,000 dollars a year. She was shocked by how low the amount was and worried about her future as a result. "I think I cleared \$520," she recalled. "I can remember looking at that check and thinking I had made a horrible, horrible mistake!" Fortunately, she lived at her parents' home with no bills to pay that first year, but she was engaged at the time and needed more money to sustain a viable family income. Her fellow teacher Cindy Broom worked for \$550 a month and had a \$300 car bill to pay while she stayed at her parents' house as an unmarried woman.<sup>12</sup> Despite these hardships, 1979 gubernatorial candidate William Winter offered a glimmer of hope for some teachers. Hester recalls that while she usually voted against rather than for a particular candidate, "[Winter] was one of the only if not the only governor I had ever voted for."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Note: the interviewers and the interviewees were confused about the year the strike happened. They state in the interview that the strike is in 1984 instead of 1985. For all interviews of the teachers in Poplarville, they make this mistake. Lynn Anderson and Cindy Broom, interview by Kevin Grubbs and Stephanie Seal, Poplarville school district, April 23, 2014, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi; Glenda Malley, interview by Stephanie Seal, Poplarville school district, April 9, 2014, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

<sup>13</sup> Marsha Hester, interview by Emily Smith, July 21, 2017, Center of Oral History and Cultural Heritage collection, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

Hester's hope was well-founded. In 1982, Governor William F. Winter campaigned heavily for his comprehensive reform bill called the Education Reform Act (ERA). While the main focus of the ERA was establishing a state kindergarten system, the teachers saw the bill as an opportunity to increase their pay and benefits. Although Winter did not originally include a significant teachers' pay raise in his first version of the bill, he was pressured by the three most prominent Mississippi teachers' associations—Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE), Mississippi American Federation of Teachers (MAFT), and the Mississippi Professional Educators (MPE).<sup>14</sup> The MAE and MAFT staged a massive rally at the Capitol in Jackson in March 1982. Approximately seven thousand teachers in attendance urged the Legislature and Winter to include an increase in teachers' pay among other reforms. Hester, then a teacher at Hattiesburg High School, recalled the rally as a peaceful affair that built camaraderie between the teachers and supportive school administrators, who allowed the teachers to attend without penalty. The teachers succeeded. After the rally, Winter pushed for a significant teachers' raise as a part of the proposed bill during the special session in December 1982.<sup>15</sup>

After the passage of the ERA, teachers' associations asserted themselves in state politics to advocate for teachers' pay raises. Although the Southeastern average goal was not an immediate requirement of the Act, the teachers' associations lobbied the Legislature to secure raises that met the Southeastern average. Led by the MAE, these groups supported the gubernatorial candidate William "Bill" Allain to promote the ERA

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<sup>14</sup> Mullins, *Building Consensus*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 82-84, 124, 140; Hester, interview by Smith, July 21, 2017; Andy Kanengiser, "Teacher salaries stall at '89 levels near U.S. Lowest," *Clarion-Ledger*, December 7, 1992.



and increase teachers' pay. However, once in office, Allain refused to raise teachers' salaries because the state's poor economy prevented him from increasing pay to the desired average. In response, the teachers' associations began to consider strike action. This chapter will explore this conflict between the state government's goal not to increase taxes and the teachers' associations' activism to raise teachers' pay. This conflict between fiscal conservatism and progressive activism created a volatile situation that led toward the teachers' strike in 1985.

The ERA's purpose was to correct many deficiencies in Mississippi's public schools after their history of segregation. The dual system split state revenue towards education, and the state could not support both adequately. White schools suffered under the financial burden of the dual system, but they fared much better than African American schools that received less funding and inferior supplies.<sup>16</sup> Black teachers still made 39 percent of what white teachers earned in 1950.<sup>17</sup> Despite the deficiencies of this overburdened system, whites strongly supported segregated schools. The state government and school administrators used massive resistance tactics to maintain segregation after the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision. For example, the Legislature removed the compulsory school attendance law to hinder integration.<sup>18</sup> After their attempts to slow integration failed by the early 1970s, white Mississippians created private schools across the state. Approximately 19 percent of white students in Mississippi during the 1971-1972 school year moved from public to private schools.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 34-35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Bolton, *William F. Winter, and the New Mississippi*, 215-216.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 247.

Twenty-nine thousand students migrated from public schools to the private schools in 1970. This shift led the Legislature to cut twelve million dollars from the state budget for public education.<sup>20</sup> Though this migration was not statewide, the movement perpetuated the dual school system in these areas.<sup>21</sup> These schools also took money and resources, such as teachers, textbooks and other materials, away from the public schools.<sup>22</sup> In some cases, the public schools from Tunica, Clay, and Benton counties still paid a few teachers who began teaching at the nearby private schools.<sup>23</sup> By draining money and resources away from the public schools, private schools undermined the integration process but also hindered public school reforms. During this process, some legislators began to see public schools as schools for black children; and therefore, they did not seek to improve public education.<sup>24</sup> Many of those legislators opposed to kindergartens did not want younger children from different races to share the same classroom.<sup>25</sup>

Other legislators hesitated on passing any education reforms because they worried that the increase in taxes necessary to fund the act would be too burdensome. During 1980, a nationwide recession hit Mississippi, and the incoming Reagan administration threatened to cut federal funding from Mississippi education. Approximately 25 percent of the state's budget for education came from federal spending.<sup>26</sup> Low tax revenue, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>22</sup> Michael W. Fuquay, "Civil Rights and the Private School Movement in Mississippi, 1964-1971," *History of Education Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2002): 178; Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 245.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 178; Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 177.

<sup>24</sup> Bolton, *William F. Winter*, 214-15.

<sup>25</sup> Jim C. Simpson, interview by Charles C. Bolton, May 11-12, 1992, transcript, 19, Center of Oral History and Cultural Heritage Collection, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

<sup>26</sup> Mullins, *Building Consensus*, 40.

slow economy, and threat of the federal funding cuts made the Legislature reluctant to pass any education reforms.<sup>27</sup>

After Winter's bills to reform education failed during the regular 1982 legislative sessions, he called for a special session to negotiate over the reforms and their funding. In the fall of 1982, Winter consulted the State Research Associates to study the school system and give him recommendations on what to include in the final ERA bill. Based on their report, he added their recommendation to include the goal to match the teachers' salaries to the Southeastern average. Mississippi teachers on average made approximately \$14,000 while the Southeastern average was \$17,000.<sup>28</sup> As he promised during the teacher rally in March 1982, he proposed a thousand dollars for the 1983-1984 school year with an additional pay increase for teachers with more experience.<sup>29</sup>

Winter helped alleviate these fears over taxation by using the help of local newspapers like the *Clarion-Ledger* to help shift public opinion. Despite the *Clarion-Ledger's* history of promoting segregated public schools, the newspaper's owners and staff now endorsed the progressive ERA. They touted the ERA as a measure to help correct Mississippi's underperformance in public education. Editor Charles L Overby published research on education issues in the state to push for ERA while in contact with the Governor's Mansion. By highlighting the low literacy rates, high number of student drop-outs and small teachers' pay, Overby helped communicate to the public and the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

Legislature that Winter's reforms were necessary.<sup>30</sup> Along with the newspaper's coverage, Winter delivered speeches and participated in forums across the state to build support for the Act.<sup>31</sup> The teachers' associations saw Winter's urgings and the *Clarion-Ledger's* support for education reforms as a promising sign that a raise was imminent.

To pay for the reforms, Winter and the Legislature eventually settled on raising the Mississippi sales tax by one-half percent to 5.5 percent, increasing individual and corporate tax, and adding a levied tax on alcohol, tobacco, and soft drinks to fund the ERA.<sup>32</sup> The Legislature passed the ERA, establishing comprehensive reforms including statewide kindergartens, reading aides programs, new compulsory attendance law, stricter teacher certifications, and a teachers' pay raise for the 1983-1984 school year along with the tentative goal to increase their salaries to the Southeastern pay average in future.<sup>33</sup> The ERA became a "major victory" for Winter in his administration, and his legacy reverberated throughout Mississippi politics in the 1980s.<sup>34</sup>

Now a pioneer in education reform, Mississippi gained national notoriety after the passage of the ERA. Mississippi passed the education reforms four months before the Reagan administration called for national education reform through the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983.<sup>35</sup> The *Clarion-Ledger* newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage and activism in favor of the Act. As specified in the ERA, the Legislature gave the teachers a 10 percent pay increase in 1983. Fifty-two million dollars of the education

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<sup>30</sup> Bolton, *William F. Winter*, 214-15; Kathleen Woodruff Wickham, *The Role of the Clarion-Ledger in the Adoption of the 1982 Education Reform Act: Winning the Pulitzer Prize* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 18, 21, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Bolton, *William F. Winter*, 221-222.

<sup>32</sup> Mullins, *Building Consensus*, 182. Bolton, *William F. Winter*, 220-225.

<sup>33</sup> Bolton, *William F. Winter*, 229; Mullins, *Building Consensus*, 124.

<sup>34</sup> Bolton, *William F. Winter*, 230.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

budget went toward the ERA with forty million of that total going to teachers' pay. The statewide entry average for teachers with a bachelor's degree rose to \$11,475. However, Mississippi teachers' salaries still did not match their neighbors.<sup>36</sup> In the 1983-1984 school year, Mississippi's teachers' pay average was \$15,812 while the Southeastern average was \$18,429.<sup>37</sup>

The teachers' associations also rode Winter's wave of success. The MAE, Mississippi's largest teachers' union, had a 12 percent increase in membership in 1983, totaling their numbers to about 13,000 members, and subsequently won a special national award for the increase.<sup>38</sup> By 1983, the membership of the MAFT, a competing teachers' association and union based in the Gulf Coast, rose to an estimated total of 3,700 members, and the MPE membership also increased to approximately 2,000. Among the MAE, MAFT, and the MPE, the total number of membership was approximately 18,700 members. Despite the organizations' success, 13,000 teachers, half of Mississippi public school teachers, still refused to join any of the groups.<sup>39</sup> However, with their memberships on the rise, each association vied to be the voice of Mississippi teachers.

The teachers' associations had similar goals in advocating for teachers' pay, but they did not agree on strategy. While technically a union, the MAE actively avoided the union label. However, the MAFT proudly adopted the label.<sup>40</sup> Together, these teachers'

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<sup>36</sup> "Leaders of teachers' group to lobby on Capitol steps," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 14, 1984.

<sup>37</sup> Woodruff, *The Role of the Clarion-Ledger in the Adoption of the 1982 Education Reform Act*; Jack Elliott, "Would-be governors can expect quizzes from teachers," *Clarion-Ledger*, April 24, 1983; Task Force for Education Excellence in Mississippi. "An Opportunity for Excellence: The Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982." (Jackson, MS: Mississippi State Department of Education, July 1983), 51; Kanengiser, "Teacher salaries stall at '89 levels near U.S. Lowest."

<sup>38</sup> Coleman Warner, "MAE wins national membership award," *Clarion-Ledger*, July 8, 1983.

<sup>39</sup> Warner "Teacher groups seek bigger bite of the apple."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.; Coleman Warner, "Collective Bargaining issue divides education groups," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 20, 1983.

associations supported collective bargaining legislation in order to act on behalf of the teachers if a significant number of them in a district were members. However, none of the collective bargaining legislation they supported survived in a legislative committee even when they included anti-strike clauses.<sup>41</sup> The Mississippi Professional Educators (MPE) was the only teachers' association that did not classify as a union and vehemently opposed collective bargaining. The founder Linda Anglin created the MPE to protest the local MAE chapter in Jackson for proposing that the teachers' union should act as the teachers' representative in the school district.<sup>42</sup> After the passage of the ERA, all teachers' associations agreed that they should fight to raise teachers' pay to the Southeastern average. Since Winter was constitutionally barred from running for reelection in 1983, the teacher associations persistently lobbied the next gubernatorial candidates for increased pay. However, the MAE and the MAFT were the teachers' organizations who pushed for strike action later in 1985.

The burden of upholding Winter's legacy loomed over the 1983 governor's race. At the MAE's annual convention in Jackson in March, eight candidates, including former lieutenant governor Evelyn Gandy and businessman Mike Sturdivant, competed for the association's support. As the largest teachers' association, MAE was the most politically active in lobbying and advocating for teachers' benefits and concerns. Their endorsement would make the chosen candidate look strong on education. At the MAE convention, the candidates dismissed Ronald Reagan's plan of private school tax credits and merit pay and instead promised continued salary increases. Most of them praised the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

teachers' involvement in the passage of the ERA to woo the MAE. Secretary of State Ed Pittman stated that the teachers "virtually forced lawmakers to pass the measure" after all their efforts in the March 1982 march on the Capitol.<sup>43</sup>

The MAE chose the candidate who promised continued action for teachers. At first, the MAE endorsed Evelyn Gandy for Governor because of her experience in education as lieutenant governor.<sup>44</sup> However in September 1983, William "Bill" Allain, the attorney general, defeated Gandy in the Democratic primaries. As attorney general, Allain became well-known for fighting corruption by filing a reorganization lawsuit against thirty-six legislators collectively in 1981 for violating the Mississippi Constitution. The legislators served on executive boards in nine state agencies thus merging their legislative power with the executive branch.<sup>45</sup> By serving on these executive boards, the legislators undercut the Governor's authority over those agencies.<sup>46</sup> Allain won the lawsuit, and the state supreme court upheld the decision after he was elected governor.<sup>47</sup> The importance of this lawsuit should not be underestimated as it reframed the Legislature, separating legislative power from the executive.<sup>48</sup> After Gandy's defeat, the MAE endorsed Allain over Republican Leon Bramlett because Bramlett supported private school tax credits and merit pay. He defended tax credits for students going to private schools by stating that the tax credits would "reduce the cost of

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<sup>43</sup> Cliff Treyens, "Candidates say education top goal: Eight gubernatorial campaigners speak to teachers' association," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 16, 1983; Peggy Austin, "Candidates for governor polish platform apples for teachers," *Jackson Daily News*, March 16, 1983.

<sup>44</sup> Jack Elliot, "Times are changing for education, and for the MAE," *Clarion-Ledger*, June 12, 1983.

<sup>45</sup> Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 164-165.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-166.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

public education.” The teachers’ associations did not find Bramlett's response encouraging, recalling the massive white migration to private schools in 1970 and subsequent budget cuts.<sup>49</sup> Although Allain did not attend the MAE convention, his service as a member of the state board of education made the teachers’ associations consider him. After gaining the MAE’s endorsement, Allain accused Bramlett of planning to undermine the ERA by delaying the Act’s implementation and affirmed his opposition to merit pay and the proposed tax credits.<sup>50</sup> After Allain's victory, the MAE insisted that he and legislators needed to raise teachers' salaries to keep quality teachers in the state.<sup>51</sup>

Although Allain won the election, he did not escape unscathed. During the last months of the campaign, two lawyers working for the Bramlett campaign accused Allain of having sex with male African American prostitutes.<sup>52</sup> The accusations damaged Allain’s reputation. Representative James C. Simpson, a close friend of Allain's, recalled the governor's reaction to the aftermath of the reorganization plan. “Governor Allain,” he said, “came into office with some terrible scars from that awful campaign that he went through. I think it left some psychological scar tissue where Governor Allain was not very outgoing and not very communicative at all, not with the legislature, not with anybody.”<sup>53</sup> Allain’s ordeal gives context to his cold behavior during the teachers’ strike.

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<sup>49</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 241.

<sup>50</sup> Jack Elliott, “Bramlett’s stand on merit pay, tuition credits chills teachers,” *Clarion-Ledger*, September 26, 1983.; Associated Press, “Why MAE chose Allain”, *Clarion-Ledger*, September 27, 1983; Jack Elliott, “State educators endorse Allain for governor,” *Clarion-Ledger*, September 25, 1983.; Note: Mississippi and the rest of the country experienced a deep economic recession in 1981 and 1982 that the state was still recovering from in 1983.

<sup>51</sup> Elliott, “State educators endorse Allain for governor”; Andy Kanengiser, “Educators’ Group seeks salary commitment,” *Jackson Daily News*, December 14, 1984.

<sup>52</sup> Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 155-158.

<sup>53</sup> Simpson, interview by Bolton, May 11-12, 1992, 25.



Simpson explained Allain's reaction as a "reluctance on his part to meet with anybody" including the teachers' associations when the strike started in 1985.<sup>54</sup> Although the MAE got their candidate, Allain's commitment to the ERA did not include increasing teachers' pay to the Southeastern average.

To try to convince the Legislature and Allain to raise teachers' pay in 1984, the teachers' associations, including the MAE, produced strong arguments for meeting the Southeastern average.<sup>55</sup> However, the teachers' associations and the Legislature interpreted the ERA's Southeastern average clause differently. The Act's language was tentative: that "the teachers of this state, to the extent possible, receive salaries that are at least equal to the average of the salaries received by teachers in the southeastern United States."<sup>56</sup> The key phrase, "to the extent possible," gave the Legislature flexibility on when and how much to give the teachers a pay raise. Although the lawmakers did raise the teacher salary for the 1983-1984 school year as the Act dictated, the Legislature did not raise the teacher salaries for the 1984-1985 school year. They cited the state's bad economy as the reason for their decision.<sup>57</sup>

As the teachers pointed out, raising the salaries to the Southeastern average would prevent quality teachers from moving to other states. While Mississippi teachers had an average annual salary of approximately \$15,800, Alabama had the highest annual teacher pay at \$18,600. Louisiana's average annual salary was close to Alabama's at \$18,500.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Kanengiser, "Educators' Group seeks salary commitment"; Andy Kanengiser, "MAE to take action on pay recommendation," *Jackson Daily News*, September 17, 1984.

<sup>56</sup> Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 Section 37-1-2 (p)

<sup>57</sup> Kanengiser, "Educators' Group seeks salary commitment"; Kanengiser "MAE to take action on pay recommendation."

Tennessee raised their teacher salaries to \$18,230. Mississippi got ahead of Arkansas for higher teacher pay in the 1983-1984 school year by a twenty-five dollar margin.

However, Arkansas raised their teachers' pay to \$17,331 after their 1984-1985 raise, topping Mississippi's average again.<sup>58</sup> The pay increases in other states continued to move the salary goal posts farther.

However, the teachers' associations had little optimism for the 1984 Legislature to raise their pay. Public school districts, like that in Hattiesburg, likewise exhibited low morale. The Hattiesburg School Board had already announced that they could not raise their teachers' salaries that year. The superintendent of the Hattiesburg school district, Sam Spinks, argued that the district budget could not add a pay raise for the teachers. However, the Hattiesburg chapters of all the teachers' associations did not expect a pay raise. The president of the Hattiesburg MPE chapter, Gerald Shepard, stated that "as a group of professionals we are definitely underpaid. We deserve a raise, we want a raise, and we need a raise, but we are not going get one due to the present financial situation." However, he stated with some optimism, "Hopefully, if the Legislature acts in good faith, we will soon see the teacher salaries come up to the Southeastern average."<sup>59</sup> The Hattiesburg chapter president of the MAFT, Maryann Graczyk, described the Legislature's mismanagement of the ERA tax funding and their failure to raise the state teachers' salaries in the 1984 Legislature. When describing the low teacher morale, she stated that "taxes were raised and people were told these taxes would be used to better

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Naylor, "Mississippi teachers' salaries continue to lag," *The Meridan Star*, July 23, 1984; Jack Elliott, "State educators endorse Allain for governor."

<sup>59</sup> Ken Pilarski, "Hattiesburg teachers: Pay raise denial no surprise," *Hattiesburg American*, May 15, 1984.

education. Now that money is being used for other things and education is being slighted.” She continued to revisit the argument for Southeastern pay average that teachers’ pay must meet this average in order to attract and keep teachers in the state.<sup>60</sup>

As suspected, the Legislature in 1984 did not pass another pay increase. In the legislators’ eyes, commitment to the ERA did not prioritize meeting the Southeastern average, and they focused on supporting other ERA programs instead.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, the MAE and the MAFT continued to argue for meeting the Southeastern average. As a response, the MAE planned to conduct more aggressive tactics. On September in 1984, the MAE planned to vote on a proposal for a pay raise of \$3,500 each year for the 1985-1986 and 1986-1987 school years. Hardin, the first African American MAE president, encouraged teachers to be more proactive in lobbying efforts for this proposal.<sup>62</sup> Not only did they want to reach the Southeastern average, they wanted to surpass it. Once they agreed to this pay hike proposal, MAE began to prepare for lobbying for this proposal before the 1985 Legislature. The organization pressed Governor Allain for a guarantee to support the pay measure, but he did not give one. The Mississippi legislature would need to increase state taxes in order to fund the MAE proposed pay raise, but Allain did not recommend a tax increase in his budget proposal. However, in November 1984, Allain proposed a 5 percent increase for teachers’ pay for the 1986 state

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Leaders of teachers’ group to lobby on Capitol steps,” *Clarion-Ledger*, February 14, 1984; Kanengiser, “MAE to take action on pay recommendation”; Kanengiser “Educators’ Group seeks salary commitment.”

<sup>62</sup> Kanengiser, “MAE to take action on pay recommendation.”

budget. The raise would not require another tax increase, but this plan would not increase teachers' pay to the Southeastern pay average.<sup>63</sup>

The MAE and the MAFT planned a rally to lobby the 1985 Legislature. Tension surrounded this decision. Usually supportive superintendents worried about school closings as teachers might take their personal days to advocate for the raise. For example, Mike Vinson, superintendent of the Rankin School district, supported the teachers' pay raise, but he did not want the teachers to go out of his schools all at once. Other superintendents voiced their support of the rallies as well as their concern over the possible school closings.<sup>64</sup> Meridian Superintendent George Cannon was in support of teachers' pay increase; however, he did not support teachers attending the rally because he believed that they risked "critical public support" by leaving their classrooms.<sup>65</sup> However many superintendents did let their teachers use their personal days to rally in Jackson.

After months of preparation, the January rally began. Approximately ninety-six school districts closed their doors to allow thousands of teachers to brave the cold at the steps of the Capitol. Harden and the rest of the teachers present at the rally argued against Allain's proposal for only a \$1,500 raise saying that was not enough to raise the salaries to Southeastern average. The teachers went to Jackson to discuss with the legislators the poor pay that they were receiving. Cindy Broom, one of the teachers at the rally, heard a legislator trying to pacify the crowd by recounting that the state was doing

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<sup>63</sup> Steve Riley, "State staffers, teachers balk at pay plan," *Clarion-Ledger*, November 16, 1984.

<sup>64</sup> Kanengiser, "Educators' group seeks salary commitment."

<sup>65</sup> Coleman Warner, "School officials concerned about teachers' lobbying," *Clarion-Ledger*, January 7, 1985.

all that it could for the teachers. However, the teachers were disgusted by the previous dismissiveness of the Mississippi legislators. “Everyone started booing.” Broom said, “He got so upset, he had to leave the stage.”<sup>66</sup> Still, the demonstration was relatively peaceful, and some of the teachers present seemed willing to negotiate and compromise with the Legislature over the amount of the raise.<sup>67</sup> However, compromise would not be easy to find in a financially stressed state and determined teacher associations.

The conflict between the conservative state government's resistance to raising taxes and the teachers' associations' increasing activism laid the powder keg for the teachers' strike to ignite. The ERA's purpose was to fix the deficiencies produced by longtime school segregation and to increase academic performance. As a result of the ERA's passage, the teachers' associations gained a boost in membership and increased their level of activism. As part of that activism, they promoted Allain in the gubernatorial election in 1983 to promote increasing teachers' pay. However, Allain proved a disappointment to them as he sided with the Legislature in 1984 not to raise teachers' pay to avoid a tax increase. Although Allain later advocated for a small increase in teachers' pay that would not increase taxes, the raise was not enough to reach the Southeastern average. As a result, Allain fell from the good graces of the teachers' associations.

The Legislature's and the teachers' associations' differing interpretation of the ERA's Southeastern average clause was the major factor that produced the strike. The act gave teachers a raise only in the 1983-1984 school year, and the Southeastern average

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<sup>66</sup> Anderson and Broom, interview by Grubbs and Seal, April 23, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Henrietta Buck, “Thousands of teachers rally at Capitol,” *Clarion-Ledger*, January 18, 1985.

pay goal was tentative. However, the associations pushed the issue because the neighboring states were raising their teachers' pay at the same time. They continued to argue that without a significant pay raise for Mississippi, teachers would go off to greener pastures. The teachers' associations and the state government could not reconcile their differences. By February 1985, Mississippi experienced its first statewide teachers' strike only three years after the legendary ERA was signed. The next chapter will discuss how the first statewide teachers' strike developed and the Legislature attempted to write legislation to stop the strike. The teachers associations used public support during the strike to pressure the Legislature for more pay, but the strike resolution came at a great cost for future progressive activism.

### CHAPTER III - Mississippi's First Teachers' Strike in 1985

Mozella "Mo" Conville, a special education teacher at Thames Junior High School in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, hated the strike. In spite of the low pay, she enjoyed her work at Thames. Thames was a good school, and before the strike began, she was on friendly terms with the faculty and the superintendent Sam Spinks. However, the lawmakers showed no signs of raising teachers' pay during the 1985 legislative session, and the teachers were determined not to be ignored again. When she and many other teachers voted to strike, the decision created a rift between those who went on strike and those who refused. Moreover, Spinks stated clearly that the Hattiesburg schools would remain open during the strike and he would reduce the strikers' pay for being absent. Conville hated confrontation of any sort, but she felt compelled to strike so they could get the pay that they deserved. A week before the strike, she joined the MAFT, and the day before the strike, the strikers made picket signs and planned for the day ahead.

On the morning of February 25, 1985, Conville marched with the other striking teachers in the cold bitter rain. As she walked up to the school, her pastor drove up to give her coffee and encouragement. "You are doing the right thing," he said hugging her. Taking his kind words to heart, she moved on to the school. The strikers marched on and picketed outside the school while non-striking teachers walked past them. One of those non-striking teachers was a well-respected teacher who chastised and penalized any student who stayed home to support the strikers. Conville's child, who stayed home that day, was one of her students. Despite the resistance to the strike, many parents and members of the community came and fed the teachers at the picket line to show their support. The strike caused divisions among teachers, school administrators, and

legislators, yet it also showed the teachers' determination to get their raise, no matter the cost.<sup>68</sup>

In 1985, the ERA's promises for better teachers' pay began to evaporate. Teacher salaries still had not come close to the Southeastern average. While the average rose to approximately \$20,000, Mississippi salaries stagnated at \$15,000.<sup>69</sup> Despite this lingering disparity, the Legislature again neglected the teachers' pay issue during their 1985 session. Moreover, Governor Allain also argued that the lack of state funding prevented the teacher's salaries from reaching the Southeastern average, proposing only a \$1,500 increase for the teachers. Like the MAFT in Hattiesburg, the MAE chapters around the state prepared for strike action. Meanwhile, most of the striking teachers did not identify with a particular union, but they believed that this was the only way to increase their pay. The superintendents across the state split on the strike issue with some siding with the government and others the teachers. The teachers' ultimate decision to follow through with a strike illustrates that even in the conservative state of Mississippi, teachers' pay temporarily outweighed anti-union sentiment. The teachers' associations' continued lobbying laid the foundations for a strike to occur, and the Legislature's continued procrastination to reach that goal caused the strike to ignite. The teachers faced an uphill battle with the Legislature. Even though a few local legislators were sympathetic, their support was not enough. For example, Representative James C. Simpson met with public school teachers in his district to hear out their grievances about the low teacher pay. According to Simpson, the teachers wanted their representatives to

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<sup>68</sup> Mozella Conville, interview by Emily Smith, October 16, 2017, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

<sup>69</sup> Andy Kanengiser, "Teacher salaries stall at '89 levels near U.S. Lowest."



sway the rest of the Legislature to increase their pay. However, when the Legislature did not deliver a pay bill, he stated, “It became obvious to them that nothing meaningful was going to be done.”<sup>70</sup> State Senator Rick Lambert, representative of the Hattiesburg area, also met with local teachers for dinner in Jackson to discuss their concerns and grievances about the low pay issue. English teacher at Hattiesburg High school and later activist teacher in the strike, Linda Walters took this dinner as an opportunity to tell Lambert about individual teachers’ hardships and struggles by giving him examples of their financial dilemma as a result of the low pay. One story included one of Walters’s fellow teachers, a single mother raising two daughters, having to buy and store extra cereal and peanut butter so she and her children would have enough food at the end of the month. In another example, she described a science teacher who worked with her father as a logger on weekends in order to have extra money, but even that extra money was not enough for her to afford a dentist. Walters went on to discuss how one teacher needed her parents to buy shoes for her children. She implored Lambert to advocate for a raise in teachers’ salaries because “these women do not have enough money to make a living.”<sup>71</sup>

MAE was finally pushed to strike in mid-February when the same lawmakers who had long avoided raising teachers’ salaries introduced a bill to raise their own. Viewing the Legislature’s action as discrediting its commitment to increasing teacher pay, MAE President Alice Harden called for teachers to join the strike.<sup>72</sup> In response the Legislature

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<sup>70</sup> Simpson, interview by Bolton, May 11-12, 1992, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Linda Walters, interview by Emily Smith, November 9, 2017, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

<sup>72</sup> Lauren Lexa, “Teachers to vote on strike proposal,” *Oxford Eagle*, (Oxford, MS), February 22, 1985; “Faded optimism: cities, counties must do more for schools” *Clarion-Ledger*, March 24, 1985; Ken Pilarski, “Hattiesburg teachers will join walkout,” *Hattiesburg American*, February 22, 1985; Phyllis Messinger, “Teachers gamble; state plays trump card,” *Hattiesburg American*, February 24, 1985.

hastily created an acceptable teachers' pay bill in order to satisfy the teachers. The Senate's version proposed a \$2,150 raise for the 1985-86 school year and another \$1,000 dollars for the 1986-87 year, while the House version included healthcare insurance but only a \$2,000 raise. However, the MAE disapproved of the bills that fell far below its \$7,000 dollar raise proposal.<sup>73</sup>

Other government officials tried to stop the strike. On the Saturday after a handful of school districts voted to strike, Attorney General Ed Pittman persuaded Judge Paul G. Alexander of the Hinds County Chancery Court to issue a restraining order extending from February 23 to March 5 to prevent teachers from striking. If teachers violated the order, they would have to pay \$50 per day for striking.<sup>74</sup> The order lasted for ten days starting on February 23. His reasoning for issuing the order was to "give everybody a chance to cool down." Faced with this new obstacle, the MAE announced that they would comply with the order, while researching how to strike legally.<sup>75</sup> However, the state MAE had no control over local chapters if they voted to strike.<sup>76</sup>

Others tried to pressure school administrators to stop the strike. Richard Boyd, State Superintendent of Education, sent a memo to the superintendents of the districts where the strike was about to occur, including Forrest County, Laurel, and Jones County. The memo cited the Mississippi Code 37-9-57 to explain the potential consequences of the teachers' walkouts. The memo warned that "if a teacher [sic] abandons or leaves

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<sup>73</sup> Andy Kanengiser, "Statewide order bans teacher strikes," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 24, 1985.

<sup>74</sup> Ken Pilarski, "Teachers: Let Strike Spread," *Hattiesburg American*, February 25, 1985.

<sup>75</sup> Kanengiser, "Statewide order bans teacher strikes"; Andy Kanengiser, "Strikes close some schools," *Jackson Daily News*, February 25, 1985; Coleman Warner, "Scattered strikes expected in spite of judge's order," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 25, 1985.

<sup>76</sup> Warner, "Collective Bargaining issue divides education groups." In Spring 1985, the local chapters did vote almost daily on whether they would strike or not.

their job that they shall have their contracts null and void.” Furthermore, the code stated that the fired teachers would also have their teaching licenses revoked “for one year upon written recommendation of a majority of the school board.” Boyd urged superintendents to inform the teachers of such consequences.<sup>77</sup>

Although the MAE had been the first to publicize and promote the strike, the organization, along with its rival MAFT, decided that they would comply with Pittman's order. Despite this state-level change, these associations' local chapters still voted to strike. The disconnect between the state organizations and their local chapters illustrates the limited power the MAE and the MAFT had over the teachers. They had first motivated them to strike, but they could not contain the momentum, once begun. For example, Jerry Martin, a Hattiesburg Association of Educators officer, assured that they “[understood] that the MAE does not support our non-compliance.” She also encapsulated the strikers’ resolve despite school administrations’ insistence to desist by stating, “This is not in protest against our school system or our school board. We are protesting against the lack of action by the Legislature over the past umpteen years.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite all of these obstacles, strikes began on February 25, with Hattiesburg schools among the first. Laura Jo Edwards, Hattiesburg Association of Educators president, said that they would not stop until teachers have “some kind of satisfactory relief.”<sup>79</sup> Teachers from Petal, Purvis, and Covington County school districts also

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<sup>77</sup> Ken Pilarski, “Hattiesburg teachers will join walkout”; Dana Gower, “Teachers Setting Strike Vote,” *Ledger Call*, (Laurel, MS), February 22, 1985

<sup>78</sup> Andy Kanengiser, “Wildcat strike spreads, more schools close,” *Jackson Daily News*, February 26, 1985; “Teachers Strike in Mississippi,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1985; Coleman Warner, “Scattered strikes expected in spite of judge’s order”; Ronnie Miller and Andy Kanengiser, “Strikes close some schools,” *Jackson Daily News*, February 25, 1985.

<sup>79</sup> Ken Pilarski, “Hattiesburg teachers will join walkout.”

walked out of their schools despite the court order. These schools remained closed the next day with more school closings following, including several schools in Forrest County.<sup>80</sup> Hattiesburg schools remained opened only because of volunteers and substitute teachers while the other schools had to close their doors.<sup>81</sup> Laurel and Jones County schools also went on strike as they voted on what days the next week they would walk out of their schools.

Some of the striking teachers felt unprepared for what lay ahead. Linda Walters, an English teacher at Hattiesburg High School, took her gradebook and yearbook materials home before the strike so the school district would not collect her belongings. The teachers who picketed outside the school with her had no experience in striking and did not understand what was needed to strike. As Walters recalled, they were “the worst strikers ever known to man.” However, the support of the students, parents, and communities gave them the encouragement and validation they needed. As word spread across Hattiesburg and other school districts about a possible strike, teachers held a meeting at the Hattiesburg High auditorium. The teachers worried about the reactions of the parents to a strike; however, a crowd of parents who vowed to keep their children at home in solidarity with the teachers tipped the scales.<sup>82</sup>

Parents of the students from other areas affected by the strike had mixed reactions to the school closings. In Hattiesburg, many parents kept their children out of the schools at the picketing teachers' request. In Purvis, parents were divided on the issue--some kept their children in school while others kept them at home for fear that their children would

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<sup>80</sup> Andy Kanengiser, “Strikes close some schools.”

<sup>81</sup> Conville, interview by Smith, October 16, 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Walters, interview by Smith, November 9, 2017.

be neglected.<sup>83</sup> Meridian teachers also asked parents to keep their children at home.

Parents had to make a judgement call on whether or not to keep their children at home or take them to school amidst the chaos.<sup>84</sup>

On Monday, February 25, tensions ran high among the teachers as they lined up to their picket lines. At Hattiesburg High School, the coaches picketed at one entrance while the teachers blocked the rest of the entrances. As approximately 250 Hattiesburg public teachers marched with their picket signs on that cold rainy February day, there was an expectation that the teachers would be arrested, fired, and then rehired later after the strike ended. Union members from other industries came and brought advice while parents of the students came to feed the teachers on the picket line. The strike attracted media attention and support from local news like the *Hattiesburg American* to national news like the *New York Times* to report on the first statewide teachers' strike in Mississippi.<sup>85</sup>

Tensions between strike and anti-strike teachers increased as well. Walters from Hattiesburg High School and Conville from Thames Junior High school described the disharmony between the two groups. According to Walters, if teachers did not strike, the striking teachers saw them as supporting the school administration. However, those teachers not on strike argued that they were honoring their contracts and keeping students in the classroom. Strikers did not take these arguments lightly. Conville was not as

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<sup>83</sup> Janet Braswell, "Many parents supporting teachers' strike," *Hattiesburg American*, February 25, 1985.

<sup>84</sup> Sidney Cearnal and Carol Perkins, "Wildcat strike poses dilemma," *Meridian Star*, March 7, 1985.

<sup>85</sup> "Teachers Strike in Mississippi," *New York Times*, February 26, 1985; Walters, interview by Smith, November 9, 2017; Conville, interview by Smith, October 16, 2017.

enthusiastic about striking as Walters because she wanted to honor her contract and hated the conflict that the strike generated.<sup>86</sup> However, despite her misgivings, Conville believed that the strike was necessary in order to raise the teachers' salaries.

The local chapters of the MAE and the MAFT worked loosely together during the strike. The MAFT met every afternoon in a teacher's house in downtown Hattiesburg to plan the next day's strike. They also organized meetings in Jackson to lobby legislators to raise teachers' pay. The MAE Hattiesburg chapter organized teachers to go across Mississippi to encourage more teachers from other school districts to strike. Conville and other teachers went to Jackson in order to advocate for the pay bill. Linda Walters and other teachers went to four school districts including Starkville and Philadelphia, Mississippi but the results were not encouraging. "Every place was so depressing," Walters recalled while describing her visit to North Mississippi. She remembered Starkville, describing the teachers as "beat down." To rouse support from one Oktibbeha County teacher, she stated, "Honey, look over your shoulder. Is there anyone standing in line who wants your job? You are in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi. Do you think there is another soul on the face of this Earth who wants your job? Who are they going to hire in your place?"<sup>87</sup> However, outside of South Mississippi, few school districts went on strike, and if they did, not for long.<sup>88</sup>

While some school administrators condemned the strike, others supported it. For example, Spinks kept the Hattiesburg schools open with substitute teachers and docked

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<sup>86</sup> Walters, interview by Smith, November 9, 2017; Conville, interview by Smith, October 16, 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Walters, interview by Smith, November 9, 2017.

the teachers' pay every school day they missed. Laurel superintendent David Shepard committed to uphold State Superintendent Boyd's threatened penalties. However, Reese Snell, the Hattiesburg High principal and coach, distributed the teachers' February paychecks by hand at the picket line.<sup>89</sup> Some superintendents and school officials announced outright that they would not punish the teachers who walked out of the school despite Boyd's order. For example, Jones County superintendent Carey Clay announced that the school officials were "not planning on taking any punitive action against anybody," and the school board looked into the legal ramifications of defying Boyd's order. The Poplarville school administration also allowed teachers to strike without penalty against their jobs.<sup>90</sup>

Superintendents were not natural antagonists to the teachers in their fight for a significant pay raise. For example, Kelly Arnold, along with other members of the Mississippi Association of Superintendents, advocated for the teachers' pay raise. They met weekly during past legislative sessions in order to review education bills under consideration. Moreover, Arnold and other school administrators encouraged Yazoo City teachers to go to the Jackson rallies by giving the teachers two days off of work. Arnold and other school administrators were able to avoid a teachers' strike in their school districts through constant communication with the teachers. As Arnold explained, "They debated about it and had set some deadlines that they were going to try to meet, the teachers. I was fortunate enough to still communicate with them and talk with them each

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.; Conville, interview by Smith, October 16, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Pilarski, "Hattiesburg teachers will join walkout"; Gower, "Teachers Setting Strike Vote"; Anderson and Broom, interview by Grubbs and Seal, April 23, 2014.

time they would meet.”<sup>91</sup> However, at the state superintendents’ insistence to clamp down on potential strikes, the superintendents had to choose either to comply with the memo or side with the striking teachers.

While the Hattiesburg area, Forrest County, and other school officials pushed to end the strike, one school system in rural small town Poplarville, Mississippi, embraced the teachers’ strike. Like Hattiesburg public schools, Poplarville school district had quality teachers, respectful students, and a friendly community of fellow teachers, who worked together to get through the work day. The only problem that the teachers had was their low pay. Although the strike created excitement among them, they felt the same tension and fear that was pervasive around South Mississippi. For the first time, the teachers in Mississippi were on strike, picketing at their local schools, and the schools were closed.

What made Poplarville unique was that the school administration supported the strike. By February, the teachers in Poplarville had to take stock and evaluate their situation. Poplarville teachers voted at the local high school where each school – the lower elementary, upper elementary and the high school – decided on what to do. Their minds were relieved, however, when the school administration leaders expressed their passive support for the teachers’ strike similar to Jones County’s superintendent. They told the teachers that their pay would not be docked if they voted to strike. Additionally, they announced that the missed days during the strike would be part of spring break for the school. Teachers, including Peggy Ferguson and Lynn Anderson, explained that the

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<sup>91</sup> Kelly Harold, interview by Charles Bolton, April 11, 1991, transcript vol. 359, transcript, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, McCain Library and Archives, Hattiesburg, MS.



reason for the administration's passive support of the teachers was because of Poplarville's close-knit community. The administration regularly engaged with teachers, learned about their needs, and quietly supported the strike.<sup>92</sup> On March 4, Poplarville teachers along with those in Lafayette County went on strike.<sup>93</sup>

Some teachers refused to join the strike. Many felt obliged to stay and teach students despite the picket lines formed outside of the school. One example of such teacher was Lynn Anderson. Although her monthly salary of \$550 was so low that she was forced to live with her parents, she voted not to strike and tried to encourage her fellow teachers to wait until the next year. When criticized by her fellow teachers about her decision, she replied, "If kids were at this school, I will be at this school." Her fellow teacher Cindy Broom agreed with Anderson about the low pay.<sup>94</sup>

The Hattiesburg and Poplarville stories reveal the anxiety and excitement the strike produced and the debate among the teachers. Even in the ideal conditions that Poplarville had for teachers on strike, the teachers' pay was so low that they felt compelled to answer the call to strike. Despite the anxiety and fear of losing their jobs, many teachers thought that the strike was worth the risk. During the strike, the Hattiesburg and Poplarville teachers felt a unity among the teachers in South Mississippi during the strike. For the first time, they spoke up and acted for better pay while facing opposition from many Mississippi legislators. Both cases also show the limits of anti-

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<sup>92</sup> Peggy Ferguson, interview by Stephanie Seal, Poplarville school district, April 8, 2014, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS; Anderson and Broom, interview by Grubbs and Seal, April 23, 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Tom Brennan and Coleman Warner, "Judge Extends Ban on Strikes by teachers," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 5, 1985.

<sup>94</sup> Anderson and Broom, interview by Grubbs and Seal, April 23, 2014.

union sentiment in the state when regarding education. The teachers used union tactics like striking as a last-ditch effort to pressure the Legislature to give them the raise. The mixed reactions from the superintendents and the public support of the strike illustrate that anti-union sentiment did not outweigh the teachers' argument for a raise.

School officials tried to gain control of the situation but with mixed results. Hattiesburg schools came to be one of the most well-covered areas in the strike. The teachers struck for three weeks – longer than most of the schools. Sam Spinks urged the teachers on the second week to come back to the school but to no avail as the teachers voted to continue their strike for a third week. He personally called some teachers to urge them back into the classroom.<sup>95</sup> Less understanding was Marion County superintendent Thomas Blakeney, who heeded Boyd's order and fired 136 of the teachers in his school district for striking but with the intention of rehiring them if they reapplied. Another superintendent sent his teachers copies of Alexander's order to persuade them to come back to work. He did so because of the threat of school funding cuts.<sup>96</sup>

Allain was the most outspoken opponent of the strike, saying that he would not give in to "blackmail."<sup>97</sup> There were others in the Legislature who were not impressed by the strikers. For example, C.B. Newman, Speaker of the House, recalled the strike with disdain saying that teachers should set better examples for their communities and the state.<sup>98</sup> However, Allain went even further by directly threatening to cut state funding to

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<sup>95</sup> Walters, interview by Smith, November 9, 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Cathey O'Donnell and Ken Pilarski, "Most city strikers plan to continue walkout Monday," *Hattiesburg American*, March 9, 1985; Keith B. Richburg, "Striking Teachers Fired: Mississippians try to Assemble Pay Plan," *Washington Post*, March 9, 1985.

<sup>97</sup> Coleman Warner, "Allain blasts 'blackmail' by teachers" *Clarion-Ledger* February 28, 1985.

<sup>98</sup> C.B. Newman, interview by Charles Bolton, June 18, 1992, transcript, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

the school districts whose teachers were striking.<sup>99</sup> Although government officials, including the Attorney General, encouraged Allain to speak with the education leaders and public officials to end the strike, Allain was firm on the point that he would not approve any teacher pay plan if it included any tax increases for the Mississippi public.<sup>100</sup>

Since January, teachers, supporters and the interested public inundated Allain with petitions and letters in support of the \$7,000-dollar teachers' pay increase. Susan Griffich from Columbia, Mississippi argued that funding for the teachers' pay raise was a part of the ERA's purpose, and Allain should honor that section in the Act.<sup>101</sup> Cindy Bryon insisted on reaching the Southeastern pay average as recommended by the Act, and she also supported health insurance for teachers.<sup>102</sup> Michael Austin, an attorney at McComb, Mississippi, urged the governor to push the Legislature to raise the teachers more than the \$1,500 "even if it is in excess of your unreasonably low ceiling"<sup>103</sup>

Despite the majority of the responses in support of the strike, a minority of them supported Allain's stance, citing Mississippi's weak economy as a reason for such a low pay raise. For example, former school teacher Jeevell H. Chapman conceded to Allain's rationale that tax payers could not afford another tax increase that would result in a pay raise over \$1,500 dollars.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, Will Richardson, local businessman in Tupelo,

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<sup>99</sup> "Mississippi Schools Warned of Aid Loss If Strikes Persist," *Washington Post*, March 2, 1985.

<sup>100</sup> Coleman Warner, "Allain urged to resolve issue of teacher pay," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 3, 1985; Warner, "Allain blasts 'blackmail' by teachers"; Ibid.; "Mississippi Teachers Give Their Governor Silent Treatment" *Washington Post*, March 12, 1985.

<sup>101</sup> Susan Griffich to Governor Allain, letter, March 4, 1985, Box 2257, Mississippi Governor Allain. Correspondence Concerning Teacher Pay Raises Collection, MDAH.

<sup>102</sup> Cindy Bryon to Governor Allain, letter, January 11, 1985, Box 2257, Mississippi Governor Allain. Correspondence Concerning Teacher Pay Raises Collection, MDAH.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Austin to Governor Allain, letter, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1985, Box 2257, Mississippi Governor Allain. Correspondence Concerning Teacher Pay Raises Collection, MDAH.

<sup>104</sup> Jeevell H. Chapman to Governor Allain, letter, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1985, Box 2257, Mississippi Governor Allain. Correspondence Concerning Teacher Pay Raises Collection, MDAH.

Mississippi, also agreed with Allain's reasoning, adding that the \$3,500 raise would "spoil them."<sup>105</sup> These letters portrayed the striking teachers as bad citizens.

The state officials were in favor of different tactics to end the strikes. Attorney General Ed Pittman and Judge Paul Alexander differed on their stances of how to deal with the teachers' strike as more schools began to close throughout South Mississippi. As Judge Alexander extended his restraining order, he urged Pittman to enforce it, while Pittman favored punishing the strikers with docked pay and fines. Pittman also urged Allain to open up negotiations between teachers and the government officials to help mollify the situation. Allain was not interested in negotiations, and along with Alexander, urged Pittman to use legal means to end the strikes.<sup>106</sup> Despite the extension of Alexander's order, the strike began to gain traction in the first week of March with forty-three out of 154 Mississippi schools districts affected by their teachers walking out of the classrooms.<sup>107</sup> By mid-March, as more and more teachers joined the strike, the MAE returned to their original plan and endorsed the strike and challenged the court order.<sup>108</sup> With the MAE's decision to support the strike, the stakes were raised

Meanwhile, the Legislature offered a compromise of \$4,325 over the three years. This pay package bill would cost \$77.6 million and increase state taxes to fund it. However, the bill also included a clause that teachers who struck would lose their jobs and could only be hired back if they sought the approval of a chancery judge. This anti-

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<sup>105</sup> Will Richardson to Governor Allain, letter, February 1th, 1985, Box 2257, Mississippi Governor Allain. Correspondence Concerning Teacher Pay Raises Collection, MDAH.

<sup>106</sup> Brennan and Warner, "Judge Extends Ban on Strikes by teachers."

<sup>107</sup> Keith B. Richburg, "11 More Schools Districts Join Strike by Mississippi Teachers Over Pay" *Washington Post*, March 6, 1985.

<sup>108</sup> Warner, "Allain urged to resolve issue of teacher pay."

strike clause was to enforce the Mississippi Code that Boyd pushed the superintendents to carry out. Many of the teachers saw the clause as a vindictive response to a strike that they felt was necessary because the Legislature was not taking their needs seriously or honoring the spirit of the Education Reform Act. Weighing their options with Alexander's court order and the harsh compromise bill, the MAE decided to enforce their original plan to promote strike action.<sup>109</sup>

After the Legislature passed the pay package bill with the anti-strike clause on March 17, many teachers became unwilling to proceed with the strike. Teachers from Columbia, Covington County, and Lamar County school districts ended their strike action to return to the classroom. While technically the local MAE chapter was still on strike, some of the striking Hattiesburg teachers came back begrudgingly to the schools while others simply stopped picketing outside of schools to continue their protests at home. The strike was tentative as Hattiesburg, Petal, and Forrest County teachers continued to vote daily on whether or not to continue the strike at later dates. In a last ditch effort, the state MAE continued to fight by pressing Allain to veto the bill containing the antistrike clause. However, with the protests from exhausted teachers, they relented. The Legislature overrode Allain's veto, and the bill became law.<sup>110</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the strike, schools scrambled to make up for missed days. For example, Forrest County held classes for five Saturdays and moved the end of

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<sup>109</sup> Coleman Warner, "MAE urges all teachers to join strike," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 14, 1985; Cathey O'Donnell, "Many teachers in area return to school angrily," *Hattiesburg American*, March 18, 1985; Ken Pilarski and Betty Mallett, "Hattiesburg schools lack teachers, pickets," *Hattiesburg American*, March 18, 1985.

<sup>110</sup> O'Donnell, "Many teachers in area return to school angrily"; Pilarski and Mallett, "Hattiesburg schools lack teachers, pickets"; "Faded optimism: cities, counties must do more for schools," March 24, 1985.

the school year date to June 7. Graduating seniors were a special concern because the official end of the school year had to be moved back, so the school officials decided to keep the graduation date in May as scheduled despite school not ending until June. Warren County pushed the end of its school year back to June 12 by adding three days to the end and holding class on Good Friday.<sup>111</sup>

With Mississippi's first statewide teachers' strike over, the Mississippi public, the teachers, and the legislators could now take stock. At the strike's zenith, over 9,000 teachers in 55 school districts struck between February 25 and March 17.<sup>112</sup> However, some believed that the resolution to the strike was fair. Kenneth E. Milam, a labor and employment attorney in Jackson, praised the anti-strike clause as being more magnanimous when compared to other anti-strike legislation. Instead of firing the teachers outright without reprieve, the clause allowed officials "a mechanism to rehire strikers through the chancery courts if there is a compelling need."<sup>113</sup>

Overall, the teachers who went on strike believed that a better future was what they accomplished. On the first anniversary of the strike, the teachers recalled their strike as a success. Despite the anti-strike clause, Jerry Martin, MAE Board member and Hattiesburg teacher, stated, "I think the strike made a distinct difference in the response of the Legislature. Some of our problems were brought to the surface because of the strike." For Laura Edwards of Hattiesburg, the strike was successful in getting the

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<sup>111</sup> Andy Kanengiser, "Schools adjust calendars to make up missed days," *Jackson Daily News*, March 21, 1985.

<sup>112</sup> Coleman Warner, "Teachers-pay bill snagged on financing," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 9, 1985.

<sup>113</sup> "Faded optimism: cities, counties must do more for schools," March 24, 1985; Kenneth E. Milam, "Anti-strike law deemed essential," *Clarion-Ledger*, May 19, 1985; Trella Laughlin, "Teachers on Strike: The Final Card," *Southern Exposure*, September/October 1985, 38-9.

Legislature to pay more attention to education legislation, “I’m more convinced than ever this year that we did the right thing,” she said. Although both educators conceded that there were still issues to resolve, the strike’s main purpose was fulfilled: the Legislature heard their message and raised teachers’ pay. However, they did lose their right to strike again in the future.<sup>114</sup>

In a strongly anti-union, conservative state like Mississippi, the ERA opened up a window of opportunity for the strike. By the time of the ERA’s passage, performance in state public education became a politicized issue in Mississippi, propelling teachers into the political arena. The MAE with the MAFT made sure that the teachers' pay issue was pushed to the forefront of the Legislature's agenda. The teachers used union tactics and the teachers’ associations to lobby for better pay, but they did not have strong union affiliations. The fact that local teachers disregarded the state teachers’ organizations’ recommendations on when to strike or not shows that organizations were not the main drivers of the strike. The local and individual teachers, using union strike action, represented themselves in this fight, and they were loyal to their cause instead of the union itself. The strike had nothing to do with the breakdown between school officials and teachers; rather, the Legislature’s lack of commitment to the teachers to give them a raise caused the strike. When the Legislature finally showed an effort to implement a fairer teachers' raise, the teachers believed that their job was done despite the organizations like the MAE still continuing to press for more pay and more collective rights. The majority of teachers went on strike because of the promise of the ERA. The

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<sup>114</sup> “Teachers pleased with the aftermath of last year’s strike,” *Clarion-Ledger*, February 24, 1986; “Teachers: Strike made ‘distinct difference’ with legislators,” *Jackson Daily News*, February 24, 1986.

Legislature's lack of commitment to fulfilling these goals and the teachers' associations motivation led the teachers fight for more pay.

Despite the passions felt by teachers, legislators, and superintendents, each party faced different pressures. The lack of state revenue to fund a teacher raise forced Governor Allain and Mississippi legislators to resist raising the teachers' salaries to the Southeastern average. The superintendents were caught between the government's orders to stop the strike and the teachers with whom they sympathized. Many believed that striking was not the right way to go about getting a raise, but with the passage of the Act and the promise of better education, many believed that teachers needed the raise to keep quality teachers. The ERA also increased the influence and political clout of the teachers' associations, which used that influence to garner support for the teachers' pay raise and recruit new members.

Judge Alexander's restraining order and the later anti-strike pay act were attempts to reestablish the state's authority over the teachers' pay increase. However, this reestablishment did not mean that the strike was not effective. After the passage of the teachers' pay bill, the Legislature continued to increase teachers' pay for years afterwards. The strike reshaped the way that the Legislature handled the issue of teachers' pay while reestablishing its authority. The challenge of reaching the Southeastern average did not end in 1985 but continued with the passage of another major teachers' pay bill in 1987.



#### CHAPTER IV – Governor Ray Mabus and the Teachers’ Pay Bill in 1988

When the state Legislature passed the ERA in 1982, Linda Walters, an English teacher from Hattiesburg High School, became ecstatic. The legislators finally took action to put education at the forefront. Walters was particularly excited about the teachers’ pay increase provision: “We thought that was so exciting that they might even raise the salaries.” To teachers like Walters, a \$1,000 raise was like a dream. However, after two years, the Legislature still had not fulfilled the promise to continue raising teachers’ salaries to the Southeastern average. Although local legislators did support the teachers, Walters noted that the Legislature “just never would take it seriously.” Meanwhile, teachers continued to work at second jobs and rely on family support to make ends meet. Financially strained, the teachers were “at the very end of the rope.” With unfulfilled promises and no results, Walters and the other teachers concluded that they had “nothing to lose” and went on strike. After the Legislature passed the teachers’ pay bill in 1985, Walters and the other teachers saw an immediate improvement. In some cases, the teachers’ salaries nearly doubled and more money poured into the schools. After the strike, the mood among the legislators also changed towards education. Walters recalled that the legislators said privately that the strike changed their perception of education, but she stated that if the Legislature neglected the teachers’ pay issue, “they [the legislature] knew that people would do something [about it].”<sup>115</sup>

The strike did change the Legislature’s attitude towards teachers’ pay. The differences between the 1985 and 1988 Legislatures illustrate the change. In 1985, the

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<sup>115</sup> Walters, interview by Smith, November 9, 2017.

Legislature rushed the teacher pay package through to get the strikers back to the classroom while Governor Allain refused to raise taxes. The 1985 strike successfully forced the Legislature to agree to raise teachers' pay to the Southeastern average, but it took three more years to reach that benchmark.

In 1987, Ray Mabus, as a gubernatorial candidate, campaigned on the promise to raise teachers' pay, and after his election, the 1988 Legislature followed through with those promises. This change shows the political incentive that the strike created to pursue the Southeastern average. Before the fall of 1987, the Southeastern average was approximately \$22,937, while the Mississippi average was at \$19,447.<sup>116</sup> However, now left without the ability to strike, the teachers needed another champion like Winter to continue their fight. During the 1987 gubernatorial election, many candidates promised to raise teachers' salaries to the ultimate goal, but Mabus, state auditor and a former member of Winter's ERA team, became their champion. To raise the teachers' salaries, Mabus navigated between conservative and progressive sentiment by avoiding raising taxes and still passing another pay bill for teachers. He was successful in reaching the Southeastern average by the late 1980s, but his strategy was not sustainable for future salary increases. In the summer of 1987 Governor Allain was prevented by the state constitution to run for re-election, but Democratic candidates, including Mabus and Ed Pittman, took up the teachers' pay increase while on the campaign trail. Both Mabus and Pittman believed that it was possible to give teachers a raise without increasing taxes.<sup>117</sup> Pittman hoped the growing state tax revenue and results from potential federal tax reform

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<sup>116</sup> This newspaper has a chart of the national, southeastern, and state pay averages. Andy Kanengiser, "Teacher salaries stall at '89 levels near U.S. Lowest."

<sup>117</sup> Bill Minor, "Raise teachers' pay without taxes? No way," *Clarion-Ledger*, July 5, 1987.

could cover the increased pay.<sup>118</sup> Mabus thought he could pull funding from the government reorganization.<sup>119</sup> Both candidates were also closely linked to the education reform and the teachers' strike. Mabus had been a part of Governor William Winter's legal team to negotiate for the ERA's passage. After the passage of the ERA, Mabus became the Mississippi state auditor from 1984-1988. Then during the teachers' strike, Mabus publicly argued against Judge Alexander's restraining order because he did not want his office to withhold the strikers' salaries or remove funding from the school districts. Pittman was also intimately connected with the strike. As Attorney General, he overruled Mabus and enforced the restraining order.<sup>120</sup> Yet, during the 1987 election, Pittman pledged that he would increase teacher pay to the Southeastern average if elected.<sup>121</sup> However, the teachers were not convinced. By comparison, Mabus's actions as the state auditor and as part of the ERA team increased his popularity among teachers.

Mabus was also a strong candidate because of his history of combating anti-government corruption while state auditor. In 1983, he investigated local counties' and municipalities' spending habits because the state did not audit any municipality or local government for at least five years.<sup>122</sup> This investigation led to indictments of fifty-seven government officials including county supervisors. Mabus took advantage of the

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<sup>118</sup> Shawn McIntosh, "Pittman puts pledge for teachers raises in mail." *Clarion-Ledger*, May 1, 1987.

<sup>119</sup> Dan Davis, "State Health workers cheer Reed 'priorities,'" *Clarion-Ledger*, September 25, 1987.

<sup>120</sup> Coleman Warner and Tom Brennan, "Struck areas could lose state funds," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 7, 1985.

<sup>121</sup> McIntosh, "Pittman puts pledge for teachers raises in mail."

<sup>122</sup> Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 196.

newspaper coverage of the investigation to promote himself as an anti-corruption candidate.<sup>123</sup> Mabus won the Democratic primary in a landslide majority.<sup>124</sup>

Republican gubernatorial candidate , Jack Reed, cast doubt on Mabus's promise to increase teachers' pay to the Southeastern average. Jack Reed was a member of the state board of education and had served as chairman of William Winter's education commission in 1980.<sup>125</sup> However, Reed criticized the feasibility of Mabus's teachers' pay plan to raise salaries without raising taxes.<sup>126</sup> State Superintendent Richard Boyd also did not believe that Mabus's plan to raise teachers' pay would reach the average. He argued that since Mississippi had the lowest pay average, raising the state's teachers' pay would also raise the Southeastern average. After Mabus was elected, Richard Boyd estimated that a teachers' pay bill would cost \$131 to 165 million instead of Mabus's estimate of approximately \$100 million.<sup>127</sup> Still, Mabus had supporters in and out of the Legislature. Alice Harden, former MAE president and one of the leaders of the teachers' strike in 1985, became a state senator in 1988 and supported Mabus's plan. The MAE and the MPE also declared their support for Mabus's plan.<sup>128</sup> Mabus's efforts paid off as he won the general election.

After entering office, Mabus set to work to raise teacher pay without increasing taxes. He believed he could garner \$100 million for the teachers' raises through the existing tax revenue and state budget cuts. However, in the beginning of 1988,

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>126</sup> Davis, "State Health workers cheer Reed 'priorities.'"

<sup>127</sup> "Boyd: Mabus wrong on teacher raises" *Hattiesburg American*, November 12, 1987; Hayes Johnson and Jeff Copeskey "Candidates pledge to tie teacher salaries to regional average" *Clarion-Ledger*. May 3, 1987.

<sup>128</sup> Andy Kanengiser, "Raise hinges on support of legislators," *Clarion-Ledger*, January 24, 1988.

legislators questioned where the money would come from. For example, rumors began to spread that Mabus might use funds from the highway construction projects to cover the teachers' pay increase. The rumors discomforted some legislators because they fought to keep the highway department funded and promoted a fuel-tax for road expansion during the Allain administration. Representative Sonny Meredith was one of Mabus's detractors against the supposed plan, saying that "if he wanted part of that highway money, why didn't he say it back when he was talking about getting elected?... That was the time to say it." Rumors like this made legislators like Meredith wary of Mabus's plan before it was introduced and foreshadowed the later conflicts over budget cuts.<sup>129</sup>

To pass the bill, Mabus and the Legislature had to compromise on when teachers would get their raises and where to cut in the state budget to make funding available for the bill. Before the teacher pay-raise bill was introduced, Mabus submitted his recommendations for the state budget to move \$198 million towards education.<sup>130</sup> His increasing the education budget was to show the legislators how a teachers' pay bill could be funded through cuts to agencies' budgets and using higher than average tax revenue. However, during a meeting in the House Appropriation committee, the Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review Committee stated that \$147.2 million of the \$198 million education budget was available only in the 1989 fiscal year budget. If there was no other money available for the 1990 fiscal year, they predicted that the teacher pay bill

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<sup>129</sup> Sonny Meredith was also one of the legislators who put the anti-striking clause in the pay package bill after the teachers' strike in 1985. Shawn McIntosh, "Lawmakers say Mabus faces trouble on teacher pay raise," *Clarion-Ledger*, January 20, 1988; "Legislators say Mabus can't fulfill promises," *Oxford Eagle*, January 20, 1988.

<sup>130</sup> Shawn McIntosh, "Mabus budget gives teachers \$3,700 raise," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 1, 1988.

would need \$31.8 million more in order to continue the raises.<sup>131</sup> Mabus revised the plan to reduce the amount of money that would be cut from agencies but to still rely on the existing tax revenue.<sup>132</sup> On February 3, 1988, the House Education Committee's chair and vice-chair, Jim Simpson and Ashely Himes along with the chairs of House Appropriations committee Charlie Capps and Rick Fortenberry, introduced Mabus's teacher pay bill.<sup>133</sup> The pay bill included the \$3,700 average raise with additional raises depending on the teachers' experience and education level.<sup>134</sup>

Mabus wanted the teachers' pay raises to be paid at the beginning of the 1988-1989 school year, but the legislators wanted to split the raises between two fiscal year budgets to reduce cost burdens on the 1989 budget. The House Education and Appropriation Committees proposed an amendment to implement a phase-in plan. The purpose of the amendment was to lessen the burden on the 1989 fiscal year budget by spreading the cost of the pay package to the 1990 fiscal year. The measure would give the first two thousand dollars in the beginning and the middle of the 1988-1989 school year and the last thousand dollars toward the end of the year. However, the Legislature would need to authorize another \$57.6 million dollars from the 1990 fiscal year to pay for the last installment.<sup>135</sup> With this amendment, the House Education Committee approved a measure that gave teachers \$2,000 dollars across the board while teachers would earn approximately \$1,000 dollars based on their experience and education. The measure also

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<sup>131</sup> Associated Press, "Mabus to unveil education funding plan," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 12, 1988; Dan Davis, "Mabus may give new teacher pay hike plan," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 15, 1988.

<sup>132</sup> Dan Davis, "Mabus revises teacher raise funding," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 17, 1988.

<sup>133</sup> Shawn McIntosh, "Teacher pay plan introduced," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 4, 1988.

<sup>134</sup> Kanengiser, "Raise hinges on support of legislators."

<sup>135</sup> Joe O'Keefe, "Panel weakens teacher pay plan" *Clarion-Ledger*, March 1, 1988; Amy Gutman, "Mabus: Alternate pay raise plan unacceptable," *McComb Enterprise Journal*, March 1, 1988.

would authorize an education reserve fund for one-time funding to carry over into the next year.<sup>136</sup> When the bill reached the Senate, the Education Committee proposed to make the \$3,700 raise on effective in January 1989 instead of fall of 1988. By setting the date in January 1989, the bill would take only \$64 million from the 1989 fiscal budget with the other \$114 million, coming from the 1990 fiscal year budget. Jack Gordon, who proposed this measure during a meeting with the Education Committee, said that this measure would keep the budget fiscally stable. Although the Senate passed the bill with this provision, Mabus found the later deadline unacceptable.<sup>137</sup> To delay the raises anymore would weaken Mabus's commitment to his campaign promise. If they held the raises back further, there was a good chance the Southeastern average would rise again.

Once the Senate passed the bill, a conference committee worked on a compromise. During the negotiations, legislators heatedly debated when to start giving the teachers' raises and how to fund the bill. Mabus did not want to dilute the pay bill by spreading the raise between fiscal years, but he made it clear to Simpson that if the negotiations came to a breaking point, he would approve the phase-in plan. As the situation became desperate, Simpson explained to Mabus in his office, "'Governor, this is down to three conferees from the Senate and the House. This is as far as we can go, and short of this we're going to lose it. Now, if you want to protect your political promise, then I can hold out for the full thing, but it's going to die, and they get nothing.'" <sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Dan Davis, "Committee Oks teacher pay raises," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 2, 1988.

<sup>137</sup> "Panel wants to delay teacher pay raises: Education Committee fears budget problems," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 24, 1988; Robert Naylor Jr, "Changes may stall teacher pay plan," *Hattiesburg American*, March 24, 1988; "Senate scheduled to vote on measure for teacher pay raises," *Jackson Daily News*, March 25, 1988; Joe O'Keefe, "Senate Oks raise in '89 for teachers," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 26, 1988.

<sup>138</sup> Simpson, interview by Bolton, May 11-12, 1992, 34.

Mabus agreed that he would “make the public announcement that [he was] satisfied that that's the best that you could do.”<sup>139</sup>

During the negotiations, many legislators also resisted cutting various agencies’ budgets to finance the teachers’ pay bill. For example according to Mabus’s plan, in earlier versions of the bill, the Forestry Commission budget would lose \$500,000 and the National Guard budget would lose \$297,000. Legislators like Representative Billy McCoy fought to protect these agencies from budget cuts. As McCoy explains, few legislators were against raising teachers’ pay but many of them did not want other agencies to be cut back because of the bill.<sup>140</sup> However, the plan to take \$25 million dollars from the highway bond-retirement funds to pay partly for the teachers’ pay raise was the most controversial part of the compromise. The House Appropriations Committee approved the measure to use highway bond-retirement funds to pay for the raises in part.<sup>141</sup> However, McCoy opposed this plan because it would signal that highway funding would have to compete for tax revenue reserved for the highway project with teachers pay increases. Nevertheless, the legislators, who voted for the teachers’ pay bill, became obligated to allow the \$25 million to fund the bill.<sup>142</sup>

At the end of the negotiations, the House and Senate finally agreed on how to finance the teachers' pay package. They authorized the refinancing of the highway bond-retirement funding in order to take \$25 million from it, and they took \$8.5 million from

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>140</sup> Ruth Ingram, “House panel Oks teacher pay hike, but members fear funding problems,” *Clarion-Ledger*, March 5, 1988; Dan Davis, “Teacher pay-hike bill moves to full House,” *Clarion-Ledger*, March 8, 1988.

<sup>141</sup> James Saggus, “Teacher pay conferences delay raises,” *Hattiesburg American*, April 4, 1988; “Committees OK four parts of teacher pay funding plan,” *Hattiesburg American*, April 6, 1988.

<sup>142</sup> “House panel OKs refinancing to fund teacher pay raise,” *Clarion-Ledger*, April 6, 1988.



other various agencies to finance the bill. The rest of the funding came from existing tax revenue. In addition, the bill allowed legislators to cut teachers' pay if necessary in the future. As a result, the teachers' pay rose on average approximately \$3,700 dollars to be paid over the following two years, beginning on December 15, 1988 after the \$1,000 dollar pay increase from the 1985 pay package. The price tag for this substantial pay bill was \$65.5 million for the 1988 fiscal year and another \$117.5 million for the next fiscal year.<sup>143</sup>

With this legislation, Mabus successfully fulfilled his campaign promise to increase teachers' pay to the Southeastern average. By the 1989-90 school year, the teacher pay average was about \$24,552, which was above the Southeastern average by one hundred dollars. Six years after the ERA's passage, the goal to raise teachers' pay to the Southeastern average became a reality. Despite the wait, the teachers were amazed at the result. For example, until the bill passed, Janet Padgett, a Social Studies teacher at North Forrest High School, believed that the legislators would not increase the teachers' raises. Jerry Caruthers, MAE program director commented that the teachers' pay bill was "the single most important piece of education funding that has come down in Mississippi." He continued that the state "will be able to attract better qualified people into the teaching profession."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> "House panel OKs refinancing to fund teacher pay raise," *Clarion-Ledger*, April 6, 1988; "House Oks bills for pay hikes," *Clarion-Ledger*, April 7, 1988; "Mabus wins battle in teacher pay raise fight," *Hattiesburg American*, April 13, 1988; Dan Davis, "House uses \$25 million from highway fund for teachers," *Clarion-Ledger*, April 13, 1988; "Lawmakers close to pact on teacher pay," *Jackson Daily News*, April 27, 1988; Dan Davis and Joe O'Keefe, "Mabus follows through on campaign promise," *Clarion-Ledger*, April 28, 1988.

<sup>144</sup> "Teacher pay bill awaits Mabus OK," *Hattiesburg American*, April 28, 1988; Tim Doherty, "Area educators greet pay raise with elation," *Hattiesburg American*, April 28, 1988; Davis and O'Keefe, "Mabus follows through on campaign promise"; Kanengiser, "Raise hinges on support of legislators."

However, despite the teacher-pay bill's passage, Mabus also reached his limit in education reform when he tried to establish and implement his next education project BEST (Better Education for Success Tomorrow). The project sought to give cash grants to quality schools, establish literacy programs for children of all ages and screening programs for physical and learning disabilities for children before they enter kindergarten, and reorganize the K-3 grades in failing schools so that children were grouped by skill level.<sup>145</sup> Despite Mabus's success with pushing through the final teacher raises, he was not successful in finding support for BEST, and the program died after one year.<sup>146</sup>

Governor Mabus successfully adhered to conservative sentiment by not increasing taxes as he pushed for the teacher-pay bill to reach the Southeastern average. However, the cost of the BEST bill included sacrificing funding from other agencies and special funding including the highway-retirement bond money. Mabus simply could not continue his reforms without increasing taxes. While the significance of Mabus's success should not be underestimated, teachers' pay did not increase after 1990. By the 1991-1992 school year, Mississippi teachers' salary averages remained at approximately \$24,000 while the Southeastern average jumped to approximately 29,000 dollars<sup>147</sup>.

Lack of finances and resistance to raising taxes limited education reforms including teachers' pay raises from 1982 to 1990. With the poor economy, recovering from depression in the early 1980s, and high poverty rates, no elected official wanted to propose another tax hike even after the ERA's passage. This conservative sentiment

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<sup>145</sup>Nash and Taggart. *Mississippi Politics*, 224.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>147</sup> Kanengiser, "Teacher salaries stall at '89 levels near U.S. Lowest."

stalled many of the reforms needed to raise teachers' pay. Governor Allain fought tooth and nail to keep taxes low even during the zenith of the teachers' strike, which speaks to the strength of this conservative sentiment. Mabus tried to bypass this sentiment by cutting the budget and moving the highway bond money for the raises. His education reforms could not continue without a tax hike, and he was not prepared to make the taxpayer pay more for education reform.

The ERA lay at the root of the strike and the 1988 teacher pay bill. The teachers' associations' lobbying efforts--culminating in the teachers' strike--forced the legislators to respond to the Southeastern average clause of the Education Reform Act. Governor Ray Mabus, one of the key advocates for the ERA, promoted the issue head-on in the 1988 legislative session with a more responsive state Legislature. Because of Mabus, the teachers' pay raise lifted Mississippi to the Southeastern pay average goal at \$24,292 during the school year 1989-1990. However, Mabus's refusal to raise taxes for education reforms inevitably led to the inability to maintain the teachers' pay at the Southeastern average. Without annual increases, Mississippi went back to where it started.

The lack of teacher associations' activity, especially in the wake of the pay bill's anti-strike clause, illustrates their waning relevance. A grassroots movement was no longer needed to pursue the issue and pressure the state government to pass a pay measure. Although the teachers' associations initiated the strike, their arguments rested on the ERA itself. Without the tentative Southeastern average pay clause, they would not have had justification to appeal to the Legislature. The inexperienced striking teachers on the ground only used the teachers' associations and the unions as a means to get the raise. The teachers' associations organized the teachers to strike, but the true spark for the

strike came from the teachers themselves in response to the legislators' refusal to uphold the Southeastern average clause of the ERA.

The Teachers' Strike of 1985 in Mississippi was an anomaly in the 1980s. Mississippi was an unlikely place for such a strike to occur because it was regarded as a conservative low tax and anti-union state, especially during the 1980s. While the rest of the country was reducing taxes and reducing federal funding to schools, Mississippi was increasing education funding. Mississippians struggled to balance the cost of education reforms with their conservative sentiment to reduce taxes. The Legislature increased taxes in order to fund the Education Reform Act of 1982 but resisted increasing taxes for teachers' pay raises to meet the Southeastern pay average goal. Although the teachers got the initial increase and the teachers' associations continued to lobby for additional increases, the legislators did not pursue meeting the Southeastern average. While the nation was becoming more anti-union, the teachers' associations increased their lobbying activity to include hard tactics like striking. After they failed to meet their promise, the teachers, organized by the teachers' associations, went on a statewide strike, which was the first one in the state's history.

Although the 1985 pay bill eliminated the possibility of future strike activity, the strike did have lasting effects upon the Legislature. The 1987 gubernatorial candidate, Ray Mabus, embraced the goal of meeting the Southeastern pay average and pushed the legislators to pass a pay bill that would meet that average. To pass the bill in 1988, Mabus found a way to reach the average without increasing taxes by reducing other agencies' budgets and using the existing tax revenue, which was higher than average. The bill's passage illustrates the change in the legislators' perception of the Southeastern

pay average goal. The strike pushed the legislators to face the issue when Mabus's bill was introduced. Because of the bill's passage, the teachers' pay average now matched the Southeastern average. At that moment, the goal had been met, and to the teachers, the ERA's promise of a teacher pay increase was finally realized.

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